



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 42

Issue 3 January/February 2002

Article 2

2-1-2002

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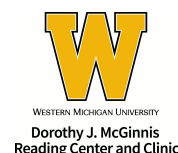


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Recommended Citation

McGlinn, J. M., & Parrish, A. (2002). Accelerating ESL Students' Reading Progress With Accelerated Reader. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 42 (3). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol42/iss3/2

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Accelerating ESL Students' Reading Progress With Accelerated Reader

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This study examines the benefits of the Accelerated Reader program on ESL fourth and fifth grade students in a school in rural Western North Carolina. The study involved ten ESL fourth and fifth graders who had approximately forty-five minutes of time for free reading daily. The Accelerated Reader program was encouraged through the use of incentives. Monthly test reports were analyzed to determine increase in students' reading level and increase in quantity of students' reading. Anecdotal records provided evidence of improvement in students' reading behaviors and attitudes toward reading. While there was only a moderate overall increase in students' reading level, quantity of students' reading increased and attitudes toward reading improved.

A STUDENT'S HEAD BURIED in a book is a source of satisfaction for any teacher who believes that reading makes better readers. However, to see an English as a Second Language (ESL) learner avidly reading is perhaps twice the satisfaction. English language learners are often reluctant readers since reading does not always come easily or naturally, and teachers are constantly faced with the challenge of finding ways to encourage ESL students to read. Recently we observed ESL students in two different elementary schools with Accelerated Reader (AR) programs which led us to question how AR works as an incentive to frequent reading and whether it improves the reading of ESL students.

At one school, a large number of ESL students checked out numerous books each week. It was a common sight at this school to see almost all children walking down the hall with a book in their hands; some even reading as they walked. Students often talked about book tests, "ZPD," and the points and level of a book--all buzzwords from AR. Accelerated Reader is a computer-based program that tests basic reading comprehension with students receiving points for the tests they pass on selected books. Books are "leveled" according to number of words and complexity of words and sentence structures. The STAR test tells students their zone of proximal development (ZPD), or what level books they should read. Students set individual goals with the teacher, deciding on a number of books they plan to read, and they receive shirts, banners, and badges for achieving points. All students who make their monthly goal are treated to various programs such as visiting storytellers or cheerleader exhibitions. Students who meet their goals all year are awarded with activities like a lock-in in the gym or a trip to a local amusement park.

The second school had an AR program but weak incentives. Students were supposed to accumulate a certain number of points (a relatively low number compared to the goals set at the other school) to achieve a certain grade in their classes, but ESL students usually did not try to achieve the points. These students did not seem to care that their course grade would be lowered because of failing to make AR points. Also there was little encouragement and guidance to help students choose books at their level. ESL students were choosing

fourth or fifth grade level chapter books for independent reading even though they were reading around a first or second grade level. The STAR test, which assigns the ZPD, was not a part of the school's program, and only some students had been assigned to a certain level. Since these ESL students had very different reactions to the AR programs in their schools, we wanted to study how AR motivates students to read and the affects of their reading development.

The Power of Independent Reading

Free voluntary reading is one of the essential factors in language acquisition. Krashen (1993, 1994) cites several studies of ESL students in long-term voluntary reading projects and various independent reading programs that outperform students in traditional ESL classes. Mason and Krashen's (1997) three experiments in university-level programs in Japan showed that students in extensive free reading programs had better reading skills. Cho and Krashen (1994) studied four adult ESL students who read the popular Sweet Valley Kids series and found that all four women made significant gains in vocabulary and improvements in their speaking and understanding, even improving grammatical accuracy.

Krashen (1994) recommends that free reading programs for ESL students have these essential ingredients: access to books, a comfortable and quiet place to read, modeling of good reading, reading aloud to students, variety of reading materials, and opportunities for literature study. Students need lots of opportunity to read and to be read. Gee (1999) considers competence as one of the most important factors to improve reading. Successful readers feel good about their reading, read more, acquire a larger vocabulary and better comprehension of syntactical structures, and are therefore able to read increasingly more difficult books. ESL students who are competent become avid readers who become more competent readers and simultaneously better speakers. All types of books should be available, especially easy books, which contain new vocabulary but are at a level that promotes reading fluency. Teachers can model reading and enjoying "easy books" and motivate readers by having them read to younger siblings or less-able readers. Krashen (1994) describes the ideal type of reading material to develop readers as I+1, which is

similar to Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development." Language learners need to have input which is just one step higher than what they completely comprehend. With this type of material, anxiety is at a low level and students are better able to acquire language.

Effectiveness of the Accelerated Reader Program

There are mixed reports on the effectiveness of Accelerated Reader as an influence on reading practice, reading achievement, and reading attitudes. Rosenheck, Caldwell, Calkins, and Perez (1996) found that despite the use of AR in two of the three comparable elementary schools in Lee County, Florida, there was no difference in fifth graders' attitudes toward reading or frequency of library use. Likewise, Mathis (1996) found no significant difference in standardized test scores after sixth graders had been introduced to and involved in the AR program for a year. Carter (1996) complains that AR devalues reading because children become too interested in extrinsic awards and the choice of books is too limited. Children never learn to choose books on their own, and the program tests, and hence, promotes lower-order thinking skills. Chenoweth (2001) and Howard (2001) question whether AR promotes long term reading growth or the motivation to read if rewards are taken away.

On the other hand, studies have shown that Accelerated Reader can be a great asset in school reading programs. Goodman (1999) found that in one Arizona middle school where the AR program was implemented for one year, the school showed significant improvement in reading test scores. McKnight (1992) used AR along with other strategies to increase reading and improve student attitudes toward reading in a group of fifth graders who were unmotivated and uninterested in reading. Peak and Dewalt (1993) compared two junior high schools in Gaston County North Carolina, where the same language arts curriculum was in place, but one school had used AR for five consecutive years. AR students had higher average yearly gains and reported reading five to six hours a week on average. Vollands, Topping, and Evans (1999) found that AR, even though not fully implemented in two Scottish schools (because of lack of books and training for teachers), had positive effects on the quantity of reading

practice and engagement with literature. Two large-scale studies, Topping and Paul (1999) and Paul, VanderZee, Rue, and Swanson (1996) showed that AR promoted better reading practice and improved performance on standardized tests. (Judith and Terrance Paul created AR in the 1980s.)

Several studies show that AR has a positive impact on students with reading difficulties. Scott (1999) found that learning disabled AR students experienced an increase in reading level on the STAR test and improved reading attitude. Hamilton (1997) reports that extrinsic rewards worked at first to encourage ESL students who later reported actually learning to enjoy reading.

Using Accelerated Reader with Elementary ESL Students

Given this research on the positive impact of independent reading on ESL students and the ability of the AR to increase reading levels and improve attitudes toward reading, we decided to investigate the use of AR with elementary ESL students in fourth and fifth grades in a rural elementary school in western North Carolina. Ten fourth and fifth grade students were identified as limited English proficient through the Language Assessment Scales test (LAS). The range of these students' experiences in English-speaking environments and English proficiency varied considerably, as shown in Table 1 (names are changed).

Table 1. ESL Students' Range of English Proficiency

Name	Grade	Sex	Age	L1	Time in U.S. Schools	Learning Disabilities Identified
Juni	4	M	9	Hungarian/but English none	Romanian	Instruction for 4 yrs. in Romania
Cynthia	4	F	10	Spanish	4 yrs.	Reading/Writing
Ana	4	F	11	Spanish	5 yrs.	Reading/Writing
Francisco	4	M	10	Spanish	1 yr.	None
Lucas	4	M	9	Spanish	10 mos.	None
Oscar	4	M	9	Spanish	1 yr.	None
Abe	5	M	11	Spanish	6 yrs.	Written Expression
Cris	5	M	11	Spanish	4 yrs.	None
Angelo	5	M	10	Spanish	1 yr. 1 h	None
Isidro	5	M	10	Spanish	3 yrs.	None

Nine of the students had emigrated from Mexico; one was from Romania. Three of the students had been diagnosed with specific learning disabilities in reading and/or written expression. Four of the students had only attended U.S. schools for one year or less at the beginning of the study, but three of those students had already developed a communicative, although limited, oral vocabulary in English. One eleven year-old student had been in U.S. schools since age seven, yet as a child of a migrant family, had spent three to four months of every school year in Mexico. Two other students entered U.S. schools at kindergarten, one in first grade, and one in second grade.

These ESL students participated in the Accelerated Reader program at their school for approximately three months. For 45 to 90 minutes a day, students read self-selected books (independently, with a buddy or with the teacher) at their appropriate levels (.9 to 4.5). The teacher conferenced at least three times a week with every student, checking to make sure they were choosing appropriate level books, reading with them or to them, and checking for and helping with comprehension. When students finished a book, they took an AR test, and if they scored 80 percent or above, they recorded the book on a class chart. When the class chart was full, students celebrated with an ice cream or popcorn party.

Monthly test reports measured their growth in average reading level, average percent correct on a test, and number of books read. By comparing the students' average reading levels in the books they'd chosen over the time of the study, average test scores, and amount of books read, the researchers charted growth in students' reading abilities. The STAR tests were administered at the end of the study in order to diagnose the students' reading level. The ESL teacher also kept anecdotal records to track individual changes in behavior and attitude toward reading.

Increase in Average Reading Level

At the beginning of the study students' reading levels were determined in a conference with the teacher according to how well they demonstrated comprehension. At the end of the project, the average

reading level was the level of books they were reading. The researchers considered that reading level increased only if students were able to increase their average reading level while maintaining their accuracy (percentage correct on tests) at, very near, or above 80 percent or if they were maintaining it at the same level throughout the project. If their accuracy (percentage correct) dropped significantly while their average level of books read increased, they did not increase in reading level because even though reading more difficult books, their comprehension was not improving.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the change in reading level according to the AR monthly reports.

Figure 1

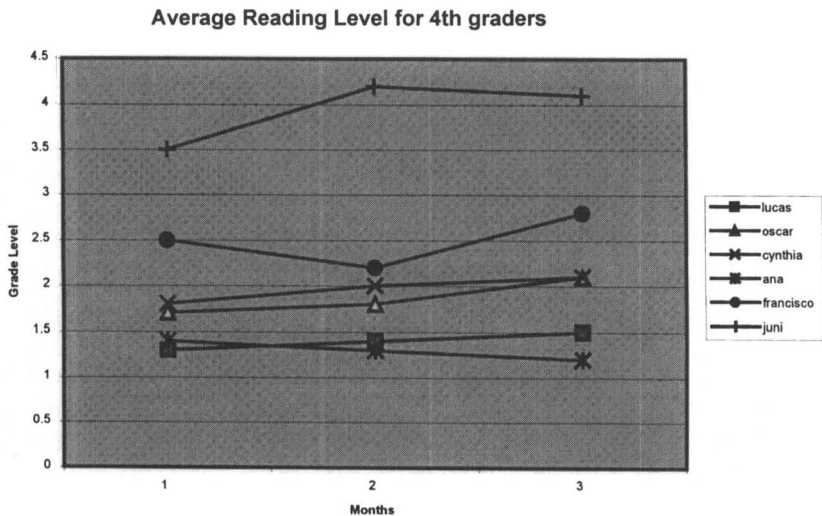
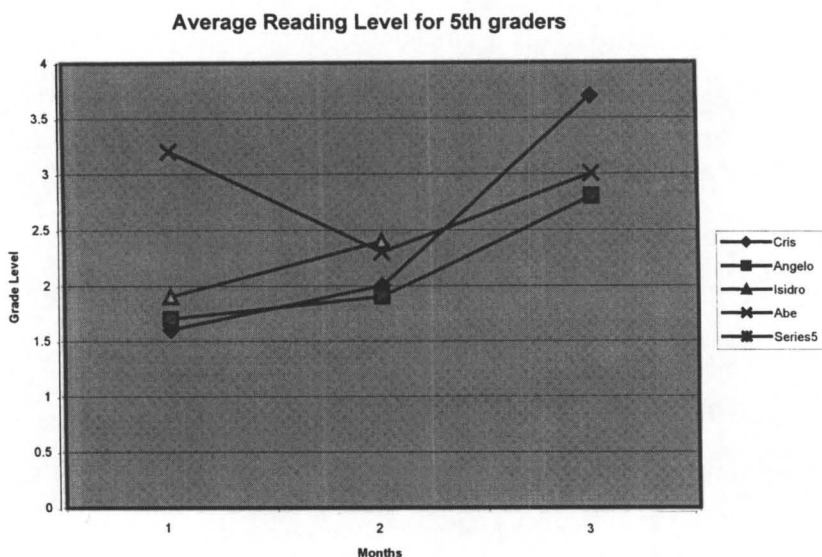


Figure 2



Five of the ten students showed an increase in the average level of AR books that they were reading. In the three-month time period of the study, students made gains of approximately 1.9, 1.4, .7, .6, and .4. The five students who did not have gains remained the same or increased their average reading level while decreasing their accuracy.

The STAR test, which was administered to students at the end of the study, assigned each student a grade equivalent score that could be compared with the average level on which each student was reading at the end of the study, as shown in Table 2.

This data shows that two students were reading on average on a lower level than their ZPD, two students were reading on a slightly higher level, and five of the students were reading in their ZPD. The

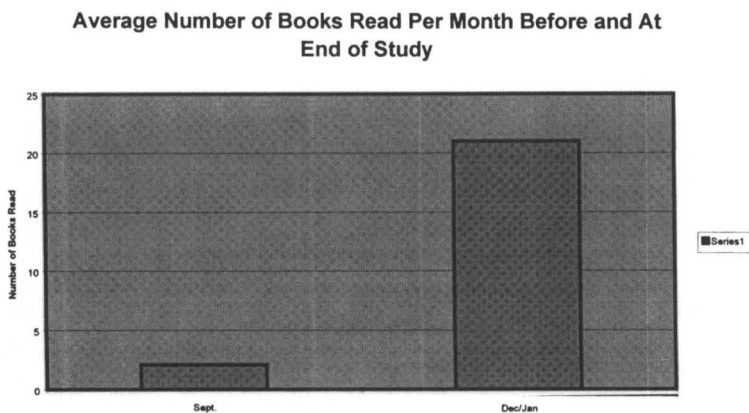
average reading level at which students were reading at the end of the study was, for most students, an appropriate level.

Table 2. Comparison of Students' STAR-Grade Level to Average Reading Level

Name	Avg. Level	STAR-Grade Level/ZPD
Cris	3.7	2.5/2.3-3.3
Angelo	2.8	1.6/1.6-2.6
Isidro	2.4	2.4/2.2-3.2
Abe	3	4.1/3.2-4.4
Juni	4.1	5.9/4.2-5.8
Ana	1.2	0.9/9-1.9
Oscar	2.1	1.9/1.9-2.9
Francisco	2.8	2.1/2.1-3.1
Cynthia	2.1	2.2/2.1-3.1
Lucas	1.5	NA

Increase in Quantity of Reading

There was an increase in the amount of reading, as shown in this chart.



The AR monthly reports revealed that in September, at the beginning of the project, 8 of the 10 students had read only 0 to 3

books (Isidro was not there at that time, and Juni read 7 books). Students read an average of 2.1 AR books for the month of September. By the end of the study, the average number of AR books read was 21, an average increase of 18.9 books a month read by each student.

Students Who Improved Reading Levels

Five of the ten students improved their reading level with increases from .4 to 1.9 grade levels. None of these students were identified with any learning problems and all possessed at least intermediate fluency in English. Only one of the five students, Oscar who increased .4 from a 1.7 grade level to a 2.1, was receiving specialized small group reading instruction through Title I at the time. Angelo and Oscar had both been in the country for a little over a year and were communicating fairly well, although not with a great deal of confidence. Cris, a migrant student who had spent several months every year in Mexico since first coming to the U.S. at age seven, was communicating with intermediate fluency. His gain was the most significant, at a 1.9 grade level increase, from 1.6 average reading level in his test scores in October to 3.6 average reading level in December. Isidro, a fifth grader who had been in the U.S. almost three years, was communicating very well. Juni, the student from Romania who had received instruction in English for the past four years, was a good reader and successful student in his own language. It was predictable that with practice he would make significant gains in his English reading. He increased .7 according to AR monthly reports. However, the grade equivalent score assigned to him by the STAR test in early December was 5.9, while his last month's average reading level was 4.1.

Students Who Maintained Reading Levels

Four students did not show progress in average reading levels of books. Learning disabilities, lack of English oral proficiency, and lack of attention to guidance were the factors that caused these students to stay at the same grade level in reading. Two students were identified as learning disabled in reading and writing. Ana's STAR test in December reported her grade equivalent score was .9; her reading skills were comparable to that of a kindergartener after the ninth month

of school. She was learning to identify simple word parts (such as -at, -op, -et, etc.). With her limited decoding skills, she was not ready for the type of reading comprehension required in AR tests. Abe was newly identified as learning disabled. Time in resource class cut into his time in the ESL class, so the number of AR books he read per month barely increased.

Lucas was in the early production stage of language acquisition. Even at the end of the project his LAS oral score was still 1 on a scale of 1-5. He was not ready for tested free reading because he lacked a basic communicative vocabulary. Francisco, on the other hand, was very enthusiastic about reading, but he did not accept guidance about his choice of books or his habits of reading. He continued to test on high-level books without really knowing what they were about, and he often tested after having barely skimmed a book. He made passing scores on only about half of the books he read, sometimes because a book was on too high of a level for him but most often because he hurried to take the test. His behavior in general always tended to be a little impulsive and impatient, and his habits of reading tended to match his disposition. When he did take the time to read a book with the teacher or a buddy, he did much better on the tests. At these times, he was very engaged with the text, often laughing out loud and commenting on different events in the text as he went along.

Changes in Reading Habits and Attitudes towards Reading

The ESL students posted an average increase of 18.9 AR books per month which reflects a profound change in their reading habits and attitudes. Ana and Cynthia, who did not improve in reading level, demonstrated real engagement with the texts they read. Although it was difficult to find many books on her level of .9, Ana increased her attempts to read, especially when books were at her level and she could buddy-read with a friend. All the students, with the exception of Abe, greatly enjoyed in-class reading. They talked about books, often making jokes or laughing at funny parts. Even Francisco, who frequently failed tests because he was skimming through books, would throw back his head in laughter when he took the time to read carefully. Lucas, whose English was so limited that comprehension

was difficult, liked trying to read the books. Frequent free reading got him in the habit of reading and gave him practice with English text.

The most significant changes in reading attitudes were evident in students who improved their reading levels. Both Angelo and Oscar, who were not reading independently at the beginning of the year, increased the amount that they read. Angelo, who struggled with comprehension and often chose too difficult books, became more interested in reading and especially enjoyed reading with a buddy. Oscar more clearly understood his own reading level and was able to pick out appropriate books, commenting, "No, that one's too easy" or "That one's too hard for me." Finally, Cris, who made the 1.9 grade level gain, showed the greatest improvement in his reading attitudes. When he first started reading first grade level books, he would say, "I can't read this. I don't read very well," and never volunteered to read aloud in class. After participating in the AR program, he was eager to try third and fourth grade level books, volunteered often to read in class, and at times helped other students with difficult words in reading groups.

Recommendations for Using Accelerated Reader with ESL Students

AR can be used successfully with ESL students. Although changes in reading levels did not occur for all the students, there was an increase in number of books read, as well as strong anecdotal evidence that reading was a positive experience for many of the students. AR is most effective for students with a basic communicative vocabulary and intermediate proficiency. Students without basic communicative vocabulary need more practice acquiring basic oral patterns of the language to be able to understand the books to take the comprehension test, but frequent free reading can help them see the patterns of written language. AR should be only one of the components of the reading program for students with learning disabilities since they often benefit from a combination of direct instruction and guided reading. However, encouraging reading, which is the goal of the AR program, benefits all students by getting them in the habit of reading.

The STAR test should be administered at the beginning of the year so that a ZPD, the optimal range for a student's reading, is

assigned. It helps students identify the level of books to read--both books at a level they can already comprehend as well as books that are a step above (their $I + 1$, as Krashen (1994) would call it). Students tend to be very interested to know their reading level and usually check the levels of books they choose to read.

Students benefit from individualized goal setting. Although the teacher set classroom goals on which incentives were based, it would help to set specific goals for the individual student based on what level they should be reading, what accuracy they should try to achieve, and how many books they should read each week. Rewards would then be based on each student meeting individual goals.

ESL students can benefit from a school-wide implementation of AR. When AR is strongly encouraged across the school and all students are engaged in free reading, the ESL teacher can spend more time doing guided reading with students to build comprehension, or doing more hands-on activities and language experience stories which build both oral and written language. Given the limited time students are in the ESL class, students need to be engaged in free reading throughout the school day, which can be accomplished when AR is implemented in all subjects.

In schools with an AR program, ESL teachers should take special care to insure that ESL students are participating fully. They can use the STAR test to assign a ZPD for students and set goals for students' reading. They should confer with classroom teachers who may not be aware that ESL students can participate successfully in the program. In every way ESL teachers should encourage independent reading. AR just may be the tool that has a powerful impact on beginning English learners.

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